A New Islander Profile

by G. E. Mortimore

HE MAKES THINGS GROW

PEOPLE sometimes ask Albert de Mezey how he has the patience to wait 20 years for his rhododendrons to grow from seed to flower.

"Time doesn't worry me, because it passes no matter what I do," he says with a smile. "I'm looking forward to a ripe old age in Victoria."

Designer of machinery and industrial consultant by profession, gardener for pleasure, Hungarian-born Mr. de Mezey looks on growth, change and the passing of time with serene good humor.

He has achieved a compromise between the busy life and the quiet life.

Three or four times a year he leaves Victoria on journeys as far south as California and as far east as Manitoba, promoting and helping to set up new factories, and advising industrialists on machinery, production methods and markets.

He takes a pick, trowel and haversack with him, and stops at intervals to climb rocky slopes and pry loose wild plants. He packs them away carefully and brings them back to a captive life in the garden of the big stone house on Foul Bay Road, Victoria, where he lives with his mother and sister.

At the front of the house he keeps a kind of an international rock garden, in which are plants from countries as far apart as Scotland, Spain and Formosa. Interspersed among them are many of his favorite rhododendrons, the native plants, those imported from the Himalayas and those cross-bred in his own garden.

Mr. de Mezey is trying to create hybrid rhododendrons which have stiff-jointed leaves and are wind-resistant and hardy, yet still are beautiful.

Rhododendrons like mixed light and shade. They thrive in the shelter of the big oak trees. But one oak, rotten at the core, collapsed on a rhododendron bed. Mr. de Mezey painstakingly tunneled under the fallen trunk to rescue each plant.

Not all the rhododendrons take as long as 20 years to grow from seed to flower. Some advance the full cycle in only seven years Some of Mr. de Mezey's own hand-grown rhododendrons will be entered in Victoria Rock and Alpine Garden Society's annual show in the lower ballroom of the Crystal Garden, April 17 and 18.

On the northwest rock slope behind the house is a collection of native North American plants, some of them extremely rare, which Mr. de Mezey has gathered.

Mr. de Mezey himself is a transplanted exotic. He has taken root successfully in his adopted environment.

He was born near Arad, Hungary, heir to an estate that had been in his family for generations. He seldom talks about that time in his life, feeling that there is no point in wasting time over regrets.

He was only 15 when his father died. At 17, as soon as he had finished college, he had to take over administration of the estate.

In the post-war Hungarian rebellion of 1919, rebels tried to sack the estate. Some old servants managed to restrain them from wrecking the main house, but they did considerable damage. They invaded the cellars where wine worth a considerable amount was stored, opened the spigots of the giant barrels and let the contents out in floods.

The cost of rebuilding the buildings that were destroyed and restoring productivity would have been enormous. To make the situation worse, the revolt was followed by a ruinous inflation which wiped out cash savings.

The de Mezey family began to liquidate their estate.

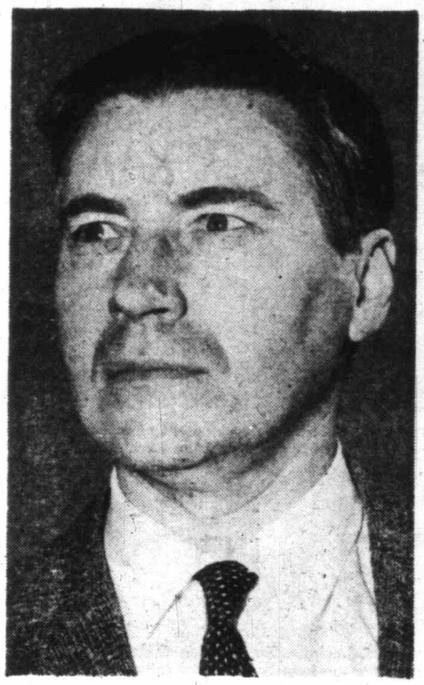
"There were three choices," Mr. de Mezey says. "Either eliminate yourself, face misery by remaining where you were, or go somewhere else. We decided to go."

He studied engineering in Stuttgart, Germany, to prepare himself for a new career.

"But the situation in Europe then was entirely hopeless," he says. "Less than 10 per cent of the people could find employment in their respective occupations."

He spoke English and French as well as Magyar. In 1928 he came to Canada, feeling that his knowledge of the languages would give him a fair start. Not long after he arrived in Edmonton, he was overtaken by the depression.

"I started to trade with all sorts of articles, buying broken-down machines, repairing and



Albert de Mezey, Hungarian-born industrial consultant and connoisseur of alpine plants.

reselling them: Tractors, trucks, machine tools; rebuilding wrecked cars. Anything on which there was a chance to make a dollar or a fraction thereof.

"It helped me become acquainted with people who later brought their larger problems to me. I acquired a shop that later grew into a manufacturing plant."

He designed and made machinery for the dairy and packing industries, and for anyone else who wanted a special kind of machine custom-built for a special purpose.

Then he moved to Moose Jaw, where he manufactured aircraft components on contract to the federal government during the 1939-45 war.

After that he returned to Edmonton and opened a new manufacturing plant, making conveyors, refrigeration equipment for packing plants and specialized equipment for the oil industry, among other things.

A monorail system for carrying meat through a packing plant, a conveyor system for coal—anything the customer required, Mr. de Mezey would make up.

In 1945 the doctor ordered his mother to move to a milder climate. Mr. de Mezey seized the chance to establish himself in Victoria, a city that had long attracted him because of its abundance of rock that could be used for rock gardening, and its year-round gardening weather.

He sold his manufacturing plant in Edmonton and bought the Ross Sutherland mansion, Kildonan, a great stone house standing on a rocky hill on Foul Bay Road, commanding a noble view of the surrounding flat lands (now covered with houses) and the sea.

Kildonan reminded him of his old family home in Hungary, which was also a stone house standing among oak trees. His interest in gardening dated back to the family home, too.

Since leaving there, the de Mezeys had lived in a succession of rented houses. In each of them, they built a garden, which they left behind with regrets when they moved.

This time, Mr. de Mezey has bought a house, and he means the garden to last as long as he does.

The house is divided into several apartments.

Mr. de Mezey's fresh-faced, youthful appearance tells of an open-air life. He is aged 54; looks 10 years younger. He speaks quietly and with extensive knowledge of many things, choosing his words with care, in a voice tinged with the accent of another country. His manner is marked by the readiness to listen, the restraint and the consideration for other people's feelings which taken all together, make something that is crudely described as "old-world courtesy."

The de Mezeys have assumed a leading part in helping Hungarian refugees. All but about 7 per cent of refugees have now been absorbed, Mr. de Mezey says. Of those who still have difficulty, many are younger people of no special skills and small ability with language.

During most of his spare hours, Mr. de Mezey works in his garden.

He takes friends on guided tours politely drawing attention to the most interesting things. He has a nearly complete collection of heathers, from Scotland, Spain, Italy, and other countries. The Mediterranean heathers have been in bloom lately, and the Scotch varieties will come into flower in late summer. Together, they provide blossom fairly well the year around.

"Pieris Taiwanensis," he says, indicating a shrub with clusters of cream-colored flowers like lily of the valley. (The Latin name is derived from Taiwan, Formosa, the plan's home.

Clumps of rich, showy rhododendron blossoms are spotted through many parts of the garden.

In the native plant section at the rear of the house, Mr. de Mezey picks his way nimbly up the steep rocky slopes where treasures gathered in the mountains are nourished. Sometimes Mr. de Mezey makes long expeditions to fetch rocks of the particular chemical composition that they need.

Some of them at this season are pale, half-dead looking wisps of vegetation. But the collector knows and prizes them. When their season comes, they will burst into delicate flower.

Among the treasures are kalmiopsis leechiana, gathered from a particular place in the Siskiyou Mountains of Oregon; viola fletii, which grows in a small area in the Olympics; a kind of douglasia from an Olympic cliff; a penstamon from Mount Rainier.

Mr. de Mezey explains, for the benefit of the non-expert, that this particular rhododendron came from an altitude of 14,000 feet in Tibet: this plant is 30 years old; this other won the Rock and Alpine Garden Society's silver tray last year, and should with any luck be in blossom for the show on Thursday.

He has spent his life making things grow: factories and flowers. Victoria is an excellent place for certain kinds of industry, he says—and he speaks from expert knowledge.

Among the commodities that could be made here are wood-waste products using local raw materials — hard board made of wood chips pressed together with resin, the kind of material that is revolutionizing the building industry in South America.

He brings out samples of handsome-looking hollow wood brick, with asbestos finish on one side and a hard glaze on the other. The surface never needs painting.

Mayo Lumber Company's new mill in Nanaimo will be equipped to turn out an extruded chipboard in complete wall-sections.

Other possibilities for Victoria industry would be synthetic leather and wearing apparel made of cloth, washable plastic wallpaper, shower curtains and other lightweight products.

Mr. de Mezey disappears into recesses of the large house and comes out with samples of each. The type of thing that could successfully be made in Victoria, he explains, is a light article manufactured in a highly-mechanized plant. Such products could be made here for the local market and shipped elsewhere readily. Their high "weight to value ratio" could readily overcome Victoria's geographical handicap.

Some eastern Canadian cities attract industry by offering a tax-free status for the first 10 years. All British Columbia would stand a better chance of growing industrially if cheaper, publicly-owned power were available.

Even with existing disadvantages, several of the right kind of industrial plants could be established in Victoria. The suppliers of machinery are willing to put up as much as half the capital, if only they could raise the other half locally. But Victoria capital seems timid. So the town does not get the industry it might have.

"They seem to be satisfied to work for someone else," he remarks. "Victoria is a place of happy gardening and industrial apathy."